

God Draws Straight With Crooked Lines: Our Journey Home to the Catholic Faith

by Randy Beeler

“I have to put my livelihood where my beliefs are,” I said to myself—or the Holy Spirit said to me. I knew what I had to do. I just had no way to see how it could happen.

My wife, Pam, and I were both ordained United Methodist pastors, serving three congregations between us. We had three children, ages 16, 15, and 12. Their college educations would soon be upon us. We had only recently paid off *our* school loans.

It was the Tuesday after Easter Sunday 2005, the week when I took my annual post-Easter retreat. This year we didn't have the funds for me to go to the retreat house I normally went to. So, I stayed at home, shut off my cell phone, prayed, and read a book I had promised Pam I'd read—two years ago—Mark Shea's *By What Authority: An Evangelical Encounters Catholic Tradition*.

Although Shea's book was an invigorating read, it said little I didn't already know. After all, I'd been Catholic for 11 good years, after having embraced the Faith at the University of Dallas (UD), as a 19-year-old sophomore.

During my upbringing in Southwestern Pennsylvania, I'd been baptized as an infant in the Lutheran Church and later confirmed in the Presbyterian Church at age 14. In high school, I was a me-and-my-Bible Christian who looked askance at “organized religion.” I went to the very-Catholic UD in Fall 1981 with a mission to show all those Texas Catholics how wrong they were.

Instead of battling Texas Inquisitors, I met loving people who invited me to join their morning Liturgy of the Hours group. This *sola scriptura* boy was amazed at the Scripture-laden Divine Office and the sincerity of my new Catholic friends.

By the Fall of my Sophomore year, when I attended UD's Rome Semester, I fell in love with the Church, reading Augustine's *Confessions* in a weekend inside Santa Maria Maggiore Cathedral and St. Peter's. As I left the Basilica on a brilliant Sunday afternoon, I was amazed at the crowd waiting outside for me. I turned around to find that I was looking up at Pope John Paul II preaching. And I was in the front row! It felt like he was speaking to me.

That next Spring, I completed (at Main Campus) the RCIA training I'd begun in Rome and was received into the Church on Holy Saturday Vigil 1983. I stayed up all night in the Eucharistic Chapel, praying before the Presence, then greeted the dawn with a rosary.

I felt like my previous faith life had been a meandering path that was now on a straight Glory road.

If I'd felt that my journey had been special, I was to be outdone by the beautiful young woman I met that Fall—Pam Rose, who was even more exuberant about “all things Catholic” than me! We started a spiritual friendship (that continues to blossom to this day). We'd say the Rosary together, then spend hours talking about the Faith. Because I worked for the Campus Chaplain, it was easy to enlist Pam to be a Sacristan and Lector at Daily Mass. When not in Mass, we'd share meals in the cafeteria, meet after classes, and compare notes on how all that we were learning in the classroom added to our faith.

We were falling in love with each other in the presence of the Presence. It's no wonder that I soon after asked her to marry me. After her initial excitement, though, Pam confessed to me that she wasn't Catholic at all!

Pam had been brought up in a loving and supportive home in Las Vegas, NV. Never wanting to compromise Pam's freedom to make her own faith choices, her mother and father, although not church-goers, allowed a friend to take then six-year-old Pam to a Southern Baptist Church Sunday School so that she could learn about the Christian faith. She soon was singing songs before the congregation and coming home asking to be baptized. Because they felt she was not able to make an informed decision at such a young age, they stopped that means of instruction.

By age 15, Pam did a high-school report on the various world faiths and came to the conclusion that they were a crutch. But never underestimate how the Holy Spirit uses our daily witness as Catholics. Pam's mom's dearest friend, Marita Abramowitz, was a lifelong faithful Catholic, whom Pam watched, loved, and respected through the years. When Pam was 17, Marita was diagnosed with terminal breast cancer. After saying goodbye to Marita at her bedside, Pam tearfully admitted to her mom, “It [faith] may still be a crutch, but if it makes Marita that peaceful, then I guess it's a good crutch.”

Soon after receiving a scholarship to UD, Pam met with Sister Mary Margaret at Holy Family Parish to inquire about the Catholic faith. Pam's challenging questions soon became deeper inquiries into the nature of the Faith itself. By the end of the summer before attending UD, Pam knew she wanted to be Catholic, but she didn't know how to be a non-Catholic inquirer at a Catholic school. Then she met Mr. Gung-Ho Catholic who'd so swiftly enlisted her into the ranks that she'd hadn't had the chance to admit that she really was no such thing.

The situation was so strange to me, yet Pam was so sincere that the only thing I knew to do was for her to meet privately with Father Don Fischer, the campus chaplain. She was understandably not at ease with doing this:

“Father, um, I’m going to tell you something, and you have to promise you won’t get mad at me.”

“Of course I won’t get mad at you, Pam.”

“Um, you also have to promise that you won’t hit me.”

“Pam, I certainly won’t hit you. Please tell me.”

“[Long, deep breath] I’m not Catholic I’ve never been Catholic I’m not anything ‘cuz I was never brought up Christian and I was afraid to tell anyone here so I’ve been acting like a Catholic and I want to become Catholic and please don’t hit me!”

Father Don didn’t hit her. He wasn’t mad at her. He was surprised. Better yet, he was heartened by her journey, for, in his words, it showed the amazing power of the Holy Spirit to call a person to the Church from outside the framework of the Church.

Holy Saturday Vigil 1984 Pam was baptized, confirmed, and took her first communion as a Catholic. It was the most beautiful Mass I’ve ever seen. I didn’t think I could be even more ecstatic than I’d been at my own reception into Mother Church, but Pam did that for me and continues to do that for so many other persons.

We continued together in the Faith. I graduated UD in 1985 and went to Penn State for my M.A. in English, while Pam finished her B.A. in English in 1987 (then continued in graduate work in Medieval Philosophy at UD). We married on June 27, 1987 at St. Viator Parish in Las Vegas, NV, settling in the Dallas, TX area, where we had our first son, Paul in 1988, then our daughter Cesara in 1990.

But our journey was to take crooked turns that we couldn’t anticipate but that we freely chose under the belief that we were on the right path. We allowed things to creep into our lives that began to erode our faith. Reading books and materials that diverged from Church teaching, we eschewed the Church’s teaching on sexuality and consciously chose to use birth control. Although we’d never really looked closely at natural family planning, we assumed that such a discipline would be too much of a burden and intrusion. Anyway, we were good parents and hard workers and highly educated Catholics. Who was the Church to impose its authority on decisions of my moral conscience?

In September 1991, we moved to Krum, TX, a small town 40 miles outside of Dallas/Fort Worth, where we had our second son (and third child), Killian, in December 1992. Having already spiritually displaced ourselves from many of the foundations of the Faith, we now found ourselves at a 40-mile physical distance from the parish at UD. We tried attending the parish in nearby Denton, but that church was in turmoil. Instead of allowing God to use me to be a means of healing there, I found ways to criticize the Catholic

Church as a whole. Immersing ourselves in political activity, we worked hard to change the world through social-justice efforts. People around us noticed our activity, and I was asked to run for Mayor of Krum, and, lo and behold, I won!

Consumed by our community responsibilities and party stances and raising three children, we slid into worldly ways of viewing the important decisions in life. I readily decided to have a vasectomy. Although we never advocated abortion, we privately prayed for its abolition while politically upholding the “law of the land” as interpreted by the Supreme Court.

Is it any wonder that our views and lifestyle led to a confrontation with the interim priest at the then-troubled parish in Denton? Suffering from his own problems and meeting two very opinionated and intrepid individuals like us couldn't have led to his best moment. Our conversation ended in shouting.

We tried returning to the parish at UD, but in the Summer of 1994, on one of the saddest days of my life, we walked out of the church at the end of Mass, horribly offended that a pro-life political advocacy group had been allowed to set up a table in the Narthex. Imagine pro-life political activity in a Catholic Church!

Having no Catholic Church in Krum and disaffected with the Faith, we saw no problem in enrolling Paul and Cesara in the Krum First United Methodist Church (UMC) Vacation Bible School. Soon after, we attended church there and were delighted by their female pastor, who was a gifted preacher and musician.

Again, is it any wonder that, given our own journey away from the Fullness of Faith in the Catholic Church, that we'd be drawn to the UMC? Here was an openness to political dialogue. Instead of a burdensome Magisterium, the UMC was governed by a quadrennial General Conference. Instead of a stuffy Rule of Canon Law, the UMC had a wonderful *Book of Discipline* that explained the UMC stance on all the relevant social issues. Why, this was right in keeping with our own political bent and oh-so flexible for our needs.

I won't sully the UMC by saying that our becoming UMs in August 1994 was the UMC's fault. No, the UMC was, is, and will continue to be a means of blessing to many faithful Christians. Our reasons for choosing the UMC had to do with our own meandering journey and my own unwillingness to submit my will completely to God.

One day I came home from work and saw Pam poring over UM materials with a glow in her eyes. I joked, “Hey, now that we're UMs, you could become a minister!”

This beautiful woman, who never ceases to surprise me, this woman who had once aloud questioned whether women should be lectors (!), smiled eagerly and said, “Yeah, I *know!*”

Suddenly, a vista opened to me—I too could become a minister! After all, my father was now a local pastor in the UMC. (It sadly testifies to my own state-of-heart at that point that, instead of supporting Pam in her discernment about pursuing ordained ministry, I immediately thought only of *me* and what *I* wanted.)

A year later, in Fall 1995, we attended Brite Divinity School at TCU, with full fellowships and stipends. Pam was appointed a student local pastor at Kosse First UMC and Reagan First UMC in the far north of the Brazos Valley of Texas, in January 1996. I became student local pastor of Evans Chapel-Leona UMCs in June 1996. We raised our three growing children (all of whom had been baptized in the Catholic Church) in the Kosse parsonage and later in the Cooks Point UMC parsonage. With the churches we served, we inherited multiple sets of surrogate grandparents. (One day, Pam was asked to involve the “young people” in worship in one of her congregations, only to find out that, by “young people,” the asker meant the 50-year-olds!)

Somehow, through it all, we never lost sight of the Catholic Faith. Again and again in seminary, as we were challenged by historical-critical methods of Scriptural exegesis, we fell back on the teachings of the Church Fathers, Augustine, Aquinas, and the exciting philosophy and theology of John Paul II.

Although we were blessed by Methodist founders John and Charles Wesley’s emphasis on grace and their melding of pietism with Anglo-Catholic rites, the UMC continued to pose difficulties for us that we couldn’t solve without referring to a Catholic understanding of the Church as the Body of Christ. Increasingly, we suspected that Methodism would have done better to remain a movement rather than becoming a denomination. Pam was especially uncomfortable with John Wesley’s departure from Apostolic Succession by his “ordaining” “bishops” to shepherd the Methodist “church” in the newly-born United States.

What’s more, we wrestled in our hearts with the UM understanding of communion as “real presence.” In UM theology, the bread and grape juice did not become the actual body and blood of Jesus Christ; rather, in the consecrating and taking of the bread and cup, UMs believed that Christ was really present. But how was this different **that** Christ being actually present to us through the Holy Spirit at any other time? What was special about communion other than that the denomination or local congregation decided to mark this rite as a moment when Christ was “specially” present?

Most of the UMs we served saw little more significance in Holy Communion than they did in moments of private meditation or in any other worship service without

communion. A member of a Worship Committee of one congregation that Pam served asked, “Can’t you just say a prayer over it and hand it out?”

Like us, so many UMs were refugees from other belief systems—Southern Baptist, Catholic, Episcopal, Church of Christ, pagan—who’d found in the UMC a denomination that could allow them to fellowship without imposing a rigid set of doctrinal standards. That both of us were feeling, spiritually, a hunger for the Presence of the Eucharist and, ministerially, a need for a teaching authority, should have shown us that, although the UMC’s flexibility was a blessing to some, it was, for deep and solid reasons, not a home for us.

Apparently, Pam caught onto this more quickly than I did. I was too consumed with my meanderings to see that I was longing for Mary and the Saints—a Communion of those who had gone before us, people whom we could know by name, history, and direct prayer, who were God’s blessed means of guiding and directing me in my journey. But I had deafened myself to their urgings, because I had willingly walked away from the Eucharist.

Still, God never walked away from us; the Holy Spirit made straight with our crooked paths. Sometimes I’d wake up in the morning to find my UM minister wife watching EWTN, following along with the televised Mass in the Daily Roman Missal I’d bought her “on a lark.” On another “lark,” I bought Michael O’Brien’s brilliant novel *Father Elijah*, devoured it in a week, then read it aloud together with Pam, crying and rejoicing in the heartbreaking beauty of the Catholic Faith that it portrayed. On her own “lark,” Pam bought Mark Shea’s *By What Authority*, and urged me to read it. We continued, throughout our Protestant sojourn, to pray the Divine Office. On various occasions, we’d find ourselves haunting Catholic book stores and meeting up with cradle Catholics who’d become disaffected with the Church. What a lark it must’ve been for them to discover that these UMC clergy were closet apologists for Catholicism!

All these larks were the blessed promptings of the Holy Spirit. But still I couldn’t get the message. I couldn’t see a way out of the fact that our livelihood and our dwelling were provided by the UMC. The prospect of leaving raised huge “unknowns” for me.

Bright spirit that she is, Pam stopped worrying about the unknowns. Ministry was taking a toll on her, physically and emotionally. She continued in it because, despite the doubts we were feeling, she nonetheless saw the blessings it provided our children, who were growing into a beautiful young adulthood.

And she remained because I did a skillful job of burying the promptings of the Holy Spirit in a flurry of ministry activity, as if by sheer dint of effort, I could make the Truth become something other than what Mary, and the Saints had been trying to tell me: “Come back to the Eucharist. Come back to Me.”

Ironically, I failed to convince the UMC of the Truth that I wouldn't embrace in my own life. I tried to get the congregations I served to move to weekly communion, as the UM General Conference had endorsed. I tried to encourage them to more frequently avail themselves of the means of grace that the UMC recognized. But not only would they partake of the barest minimum offered to them, they began to fight me vigorously, taking it to a personal level.

Could I blame them? I myself had personally fought the Holy Spirit's call to return to the Eucharist. I began to feel in my body the wounds that my own rebellion worked on Christ. Diagnosed with depression, I sought, to no avail, secular jobs so I could leave the ministry. Church became an ashen taste in my mouth. It had been years since I'd truly *worshipped*. But I could see no exit to my dilemma.

Thanks to medication and counseling, which were God's blessed means of healing, I finally began to see ministry again in a positive light. I began to think that I could persist as a UM clergy and that, upon retirement, I would return to the Catholic Church. I told myself that I was "on loan" to the Methodists. I had opened the door to the Eucharist in the smallest way possible.

Then one day, God pushed it open. One day, our son Killian came home from sitting in on a class about Dante's *Divine Comedy* that I taught to homeschool high school students and said to Pam, "I'll come to your confirmation class, Mom, but I don't want to be confirmed a UM at Easter."

"Oh, really?" she said.

"Yeah, I think Dante and the Catholics got it right. I want to become Catholic."

Apparently, Killian had inherited his mom's tendency to surprise!

We responded by taking him to Saturday Vigil Masses at St. Thomas Aquinas Parish in College Station, TX, 25 miles away. (We couldn't go to the local Catholic Church near where we lived in Caldwell because of the local gossip that might arise.) Not only was he further drawn to Catholicism, but Pam and I began truly to worship again. Even though we couldn't take Communion, it was such a blessing to simply go forward, with our arms crossed, to spiritually take part. We were Catechumens again.

My older son, Paul, then set his heart on going to UD and studying philosophy and English. I took him and my daughter, Cesara, to an exploratory weekend at UD. There, I renewed old acquaintances and a seemingly ancient longing for the Faith renewed itself in me.

So, a few weeks later, I found myself assenting to all that Mark Shea said in *By What Authority*. I searched out the Coming Home Network web site and found comfort there. I told Pam, and found out that she, too, had long had the same thoughts—and had already been at the Coming Home site.

The death of Pope John Paul II deeply moved us. In his purported final words, Pam heard a personal call back to Mother Church: “I’ve been waiting for you, and you’ve come.”

Not knowing what to do, we simply let go and let God take care of what was to happen next. It was a blessed relief to lay down my self-will and to let God have God’s way with me.

The results were exhilarating. I don’t remember fearing any of it. I was anxious—but not a paralyzing anxiety as I’d experienced during my depression. No, this was the anxiety of a rollercoaster ride, where I was so enjoying the last stomach-drop that I had no time to anticipate the next twist, turn, rise, or drop.

Daily Mass at St. Thomas Aquinas became the fixed point of our lives. The Eucharist (though we still couldn’t partake physically) drew us to Christ and His Body the Church, ending our long, long self-imposed famine.

On Friday, April 15, 2005, we were back in the office of a priest, wondering if he was going to hit us. But Father Dean Wilhelm (who had been wondering who these glowing, non-Communion-taking Daily-Mass-goers were) didn’t so much as raise an eyebrow at our story. He was truly a priest mediating the Grace of the Lord Jesus Christ to us. I’m proud of the Church that ordained him, and I’m so proud of the priest he is and of his tutelage of us and Killian.

We told him we had no idea how we were going to live. We had no idea how long the transition would take, but we wanted to commit ourselves to the path back to the Church. This was our penance. More importantly, we didn’t want our missteps in the Faith to prevent Killian from being able to make his First Communion in whatever time frame Father Dean and the Church thought best.

A mere 13 days after this talk, Pam and I had secured two teaching jobs at St. Joseph Catholic School in neighboring Bryan, gotten two more needed “second jobs” at a local place of business owned by dear friends of ours, leased a beautiful home in Bryan, and handed in our credentials (effective June 5, 2005) to our UM District Superintendent.

On the morning of June 5, 2005, we held our last Sunday services as UM ministers. That afternoon, Pam, Killian, and I professed faith in the Catholic Church and received the Sacrament of Reconciliation. The next morning, at Daily Mass, the three of us received Communion—Killian’s first. (Ironically, it was the last Mass that Father Dean said as

Pastor of St. Thomas Aquinas; he accepted a position at St. Mary's Seminary in Houston).

Our beliefs are now definitely where our livelihoods are. We teach the Faith at a Catholic School and, blessedly, in our second jobs as a cook (me) and laundry attendant (Pam), we try our best, to teach simply by our witness. We've not ceased being ministers but instead, because of the Catholic Faith, the intercession of Mary and the Saints, and the blessed food of the Eucharist, we are more truly ministering—serving, in the original sense of the word—than we've ever done in our lives.

God draws straight with crooked lines. Dare we think that we are now on a straight course? I don't worry. God paves the road. So long as God leads us, I don't worry where the next turn will take us because I know that I am now at home.